

Building on 25-year foundation

Rev. John Steger is hard-hat priest

By Olivier Gibbons
Staff writer

The man with the construction hat on directing the building of the new St. Jude's Church on Lyell Road in Gates is none other than a man of the cloth.

He is the Rev. John J. Steger, the only pastor this 1,000-family Catholic congregation has seen in its 25-year history.

"I always wanted to be a priest," says the 66-year-old Rochester native, the eldest of five children, all born in his mother's home on Avery Street.

In 1968, Steger literally built his own parish, transforming an old barn into a 350-seat church. And later, he would design and build the 14,000 square-foot parish center on this 40-acre site.

"In establishing a new parish, one of the hardest things was establishing an identity," Steger recalls.

The church's identity comes from the reverend's considerable hands-on approach to matters both mundane and crucial.

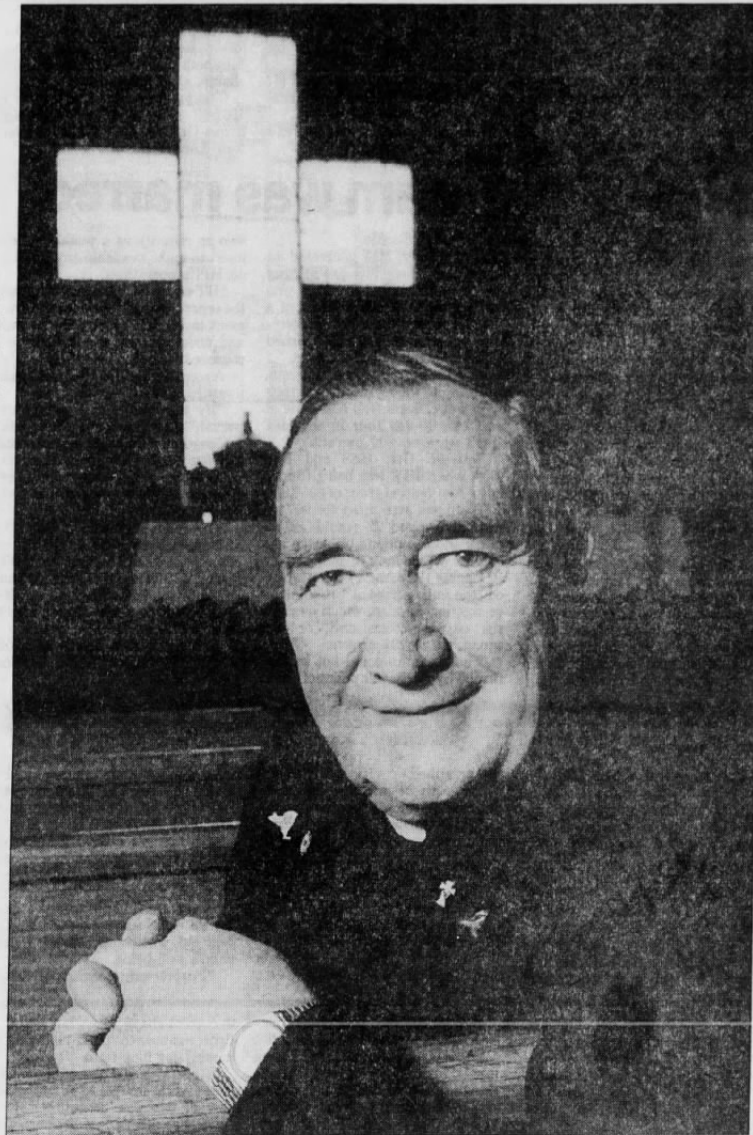
Steger compassionately attends to religious functions. In the space of a couple of hours he anointed two people, gave a job reference for a member and offered advice to a woman who was marrying a non-Catholic. He also continues to plow snow during the brutal Rochester winters.

And his attitude hasn't changed in a quarter-century. On some days, Steger can be seen atop a scaffold, videotaping construction of the new 800-seat church which will open June 27 — exactly 25 years to the day after the existing church opened its doors.

To easily understand his role among the largely blue-collar congregation and the community, one need only take a look at his garb.

In addition to the construction hat and collar he adorns, the reverend wears a Gates-Chili Volunteer Fire Department jacket. Clipped to his trousers is a red beeper.

The man of God is a volunteer firefighter. Twenty-seven years ago, when Steger was asked to serve as chaplain of the fire department, "I said, 'if I'm going to join the fire department as a chap-



The Rev. John Steger, who started St. Jude's parish 25 years ago, is Gates-Chili citizen of the year. JoEllen Black Staff photographer

lain,' I was going to join as a firefighter.

"You have to serve people where they are," says Steger, whose two brothers and uncle were once firefighters. "I admit . . . a lot

of my fellow firefighters don't go to church too often."

Steger was recently named as the Gates-Chili Council of the Greater Rochester area's "citizen of the year." He was honored at a

dinner last week.

"He is a very compassionate man," said Mel Love, the council's selection committee chairman.

"And he's not afraid to get dirt under his fingernails." □